

Rune

Spring 2024
Edition



**Rune Literary
Magazine
2024**

ABOUT

Rune is a literary journal produced annually in the spring by Robert Morris University students. The journal accepts high-quality creative work—poetry, prose, photography, art, etc.—from the Robert Morris University community as well as the greater Pittsburgh area. The journal aims to recognize local writers and artists through its publication.

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Dr. Frank Hartle, Interim Dean of the School of Informatics, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Dr. Heather Pinson, Department Head of Arts and Humanities

RUNE STAFF

Managing Editor - Mackenzie Hill

Communications Directors - Lucas Cain, Isabella Marasco

Design Managers - Sara Estus, Em Fanning, Amber Holt, Ashley Stebbins, Mackenzie Wilhelm

Layout Managers - Jayden Baysore, Makayla Harvey, Emma Kemp

Production Manager - Amy Crutchfield

Event, Media, and Publicity Managers - Paige Jubeck, Melayna Pongratz, Ashley Stebbins, Audrey Vereshack

Circulation Managers - Amy Crutchfield, Em Fanning

Associate Editors - Kaitlyn Barnes, Gavin Hartman, Lily Hoch, Christen Rose

RUNE FACULTY ADVISORS

Dr. Edward Karshner

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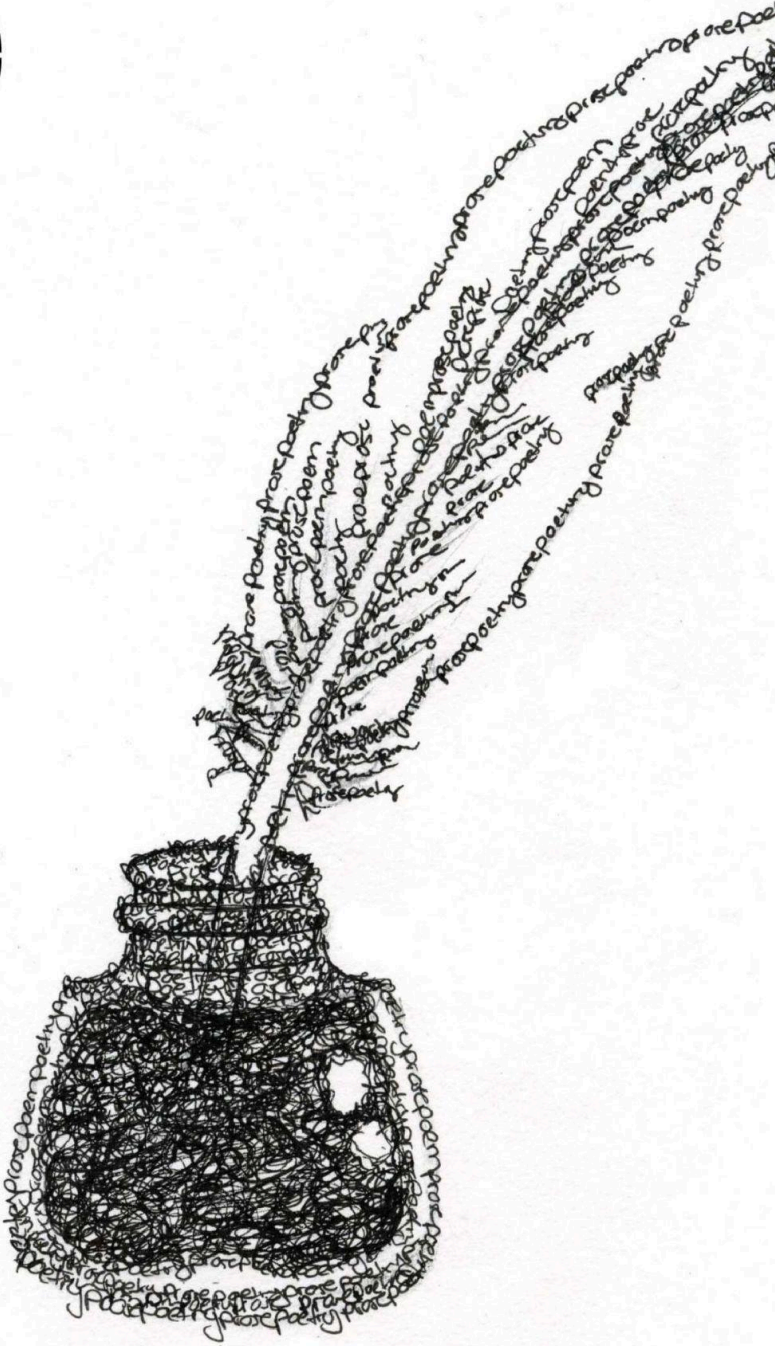
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Poetry



BEEHIVE

By Nidhi Agrawal

After Emily Dickinson —

“I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.”

In November 2018, I was starving to detached strings of empathy when a colleague thumped the desk with his eyeballs not knowing in my feisty hands, I clenched the flesh of his clandestine affair,

the one that made noise in the silent office cubicles.

I was too angry to sit in front of him,

thinking of how his large body substitutes love for a woman’s silky bedroom.

Anyway, Mom always taught me not to bother the bees on their ‘honey mission’. So, I let it be.

Weird, isn’t it?

But, a rebel rooted in me still wants to scrape his beehive, and see the ‘honey’ oozing out.

Disturbing? maybe!

However, how I mirror it:

That curiosity - the rebel, the bouts of self-loathing, the dilemma of ‘Maybe(S)’ was only about homelessness.

Plus, I am now drowned in the ocean of this hopeful homelessness, not asking for a beehive,

Yet wanting to bother the busy bees hovering greedily around the floral perceptions of a ‘home’.

It’s been twenty-eight years of hiding the nectar in my tender heart

Maybe someday, when I am ‘out with the lanterns’,

I will tell these bees -

There’s a huge pot of honey buried in the stretch of their hearts,

Scrape that sacred beehive, the lanterns will find you!

Ambrosia & Nectar

By Mary Bartels

pt. 1 Ambrosia

When I'd survived enough, bled out and dry
I went to the fields to find my lone end;
The plants and the trees found nothing in me
and the earth is wild but would not have me.
Yet when they wandered into that green field
They found and filled my sorry hollow husk.
I tell you: they created me from scratch

What stuck congealed inside my heart and throat
and blocked the air from flowing easily
poured readily from their dancing fingers
and though some spilled from my hands, most remained
secure as a full glass in tipsy hands
accidental as a haphazard spill

And now you find me giggling and 'guiled
Guarding my most fragile, free-given joy
laughing and languid, smelling of sprouting
Reveling in my intoxication,
Joy drunk

pt. 2 Nectar

And when I overflow reluctantly
love slipping hesitantly from my lips
The birds and the bees and flowering trees
And the knee high grass and sycamore seeds
Will strain for the warmth that now flows easy
And I'll hate my one-time want for this
when they overwhelm me to the damp earth

Surrounded by loveliest enemies

who slowly eat away at all I am
you'll find me, already half decomposed,
and I will say, "look at the wildflowers
huddling in the places they touched me
Look, look, my shoulders, back, my hands, my head"

Do not remove me from my flower friends
Just leave me with the earth, for she is quick
And when at last I fall and lay and die
know that it is in the happiest way
Love drunk

“in the place where quiet things lie”

By Jayden Baysore

in the place where quiet things lie
the place where hanging trophies gather dust.
the pleads of people banging on their windows.
watching the decay from inside their homes
like the copper statue that stands lonely in the square

when every ounce of freedom is still a prison,
trapped in the realizations of their lives,
how can they be told, “Do not despair”
by the dead man who himself despairs
and laughs in the face of twisted irony.

when the weight of the lead stone and
the ghosts that haunt us on our somber walks
have finally been lifted away from us
and have been in the place locked behind closed doors,
the tranquility of that broken silence has returned.

the gray skies of solace have now risen,
and I will lay back down quietly in my good home
the indifferent place I knew I’d always return to
when the dim sky met the velvet leather.
in the place where quiet things lie.

Watching the Wasps Die

By Jay Carson

In the fall from my desk
in my Morgantown apartment
when dying was distant,
what they did on tv
what my grandfather had done.

I enjoyed watching wasp agony.
They deserved it.
After all, they'd invaded my sun porch
making it unlivable, almost impossible
to get my mail, even attacking me
in my apartment.

I started to write then
first notes, then jokes,
then poems and stories,
no plan, just winging about
until something hurt. I avoided
that pain at first
and stopped.

But looking out my window,
watching those wasps
curl and hollow in death,
I learned that whether
turning a lancet attack-out
or somehow self-wound in,
the stinging time is a short summer.

I have lived long since then
and regret my pleasure
in those wasps dying.
And learned to respect other's
and better use my own stylets,

before winter.

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ON LEARNING AND FORGIVING

By Sabine Cherenfont

Tell me your secret.

I'll tell you my secret.

Or let's stay quiet

and trust the quiet we keep.

Watch the swift build its nest.

Out of pure instinct!

How it tends to the task
in hollow corners and depths,
the repeated motion of the beak
giving birth before the birth.

The task so slow and repetitive,
it brings tears to our eyes.

We can take it in as a reflection, that cliché notion
of time and healing. We can learn from it.

Adapting is loving—and loving is forgiving—quietly—
the disappointments that line our pasts.

Why do we see the good in others?

Love is our instinct.

It's how we last.

Procrastination

By Michael Comiskey

(haiku)

Finally I write
I shall finish this *haiku*

Remembrance

By Sarah Cowan

Fuzzy TV static flashes his name.
Black and white print displays his face.
Monotone voices declare his fame.
They hurriedly discuss the case.

What made him this way?
Who is there to blame?
When did it go astray?
Why does he feel no shame?

They turn to channel six to watch
As 'justice' is served to him.
The volume goes up a notch,
They wonder why his motive's grim.

What happened to him?
Who encouraged it?
When did parents get so dim?
Why did they call it quits?

Granted the title of a 'special kinda' killer,
All eyes are captivated by him for a while.
Years later, his story is still a bit of a thriller,
But they don't remember that stupid trial.

What world do we live in,
Who presents killers as 'special?'
When they brutalize our kin,
Why not call them the devil?

They don't care it's her birthday this season.
They don't care he ended her life.
They only care about the reason
He chose a cleaver over a knife.

“To Be Human”

By Amy Crutchfield

He built a home in my stomach,
In the valley where my heart falls into
Four or five times a day.

He planted a garden in my throat
Until one day I began to choke
On the weeds he left behind.

I am still naive but I know
Love doesn't look like escape,
Like a sojourn or a hotel stay.

He wrapped red thread himself
Around my smallest finger
And tried to call it fate.

I can still feel the pull of him,
Late at night when my heart
Falls deeper into that valley.

Ivy grows around the windows,
Dandelions scatter the lawn,
The windows are shut.

But humans aren't built
To be homes.
I am softer than mortar and stone-
See my hips how they twist,
My toes crack and wriggle in my shoes.
My hair a fragrant fountain,
My hands a testament of affection.
See the coiled arch of my back,
And the wild green in my eyes.
I am not built

To be a home.

Not to men who miss their mothers,
Or friends who are poised to run.

I am not a field for pitching tents
Or laying brickwork.
In the chasm between teeth there is a voice,
In spaces between lungs there is love.

He built a home in me.
Board by board and brick by brick
I am learning to unmake it.
I am learning how to be human
Again.

The First Perfect Number

By Shaheen Dil

Six breezes swoop down from the hill,
ruffle the edges of clouds.

Six birds startle, fly in the formation
of Samsara.

Six spheres of existence spin into shape
overhead.

What is cursive in this space?
What is a straight line?

A pomegranate curtain hides the number of the beast,
six fathoms down.

The symbol of Venus calls to the Magen David
with sixth sense.

Six virgins relive the miracle of Cana,
where six stone jars forever turn water into wine.

Teachings of a Derelict Property

By Ziggy Edwards

The ground is not where you think it is.

Weeds persist, and while pulling weeds
you can view their will to inherit
as a human quality select humans
feel called to eradicate in the rest.
You can imagine too the bulk of humanity
in a struggle to uproot oppression,
stay vigilant against tendrils.

The older humans who built steps
now collapsed several inches below
did not intend this dark soil
with its earthworms, glass shards, pill bugs,
ropes of red carpet fiber. You can rake and sift,
save it in five-gallon buckets
to use elsewhere.

Me and You

By Adrien Emler

I miss the days
Where it was us against the world

The days where we would sit together
Where you would read to me
Where I would read along with anticipation

The days where you would let me sit on the edge of the couch
My shirt pulled up over my small frame
While your nails calmly raked up and down my back

I know that it's wishful thinking
You're busy
I'm older

There just isn't time now that I can take care of myself
You have work
I sit in my room

You don't make the effort
But then again
Neither do I

I've learned lots from you

I've learned how to love
Even though it tends to fail me

I've learned how to be kind
Even when you weren't

I've learned how to be mad
That's something I've gotten good at

I've learned how to ignore people
I've gotten good at that too

My cold looks
My even colder shoulders
Have all come from you

I know that you wonder
Where I learned all this

And I know that if you asked
I'd probably tell you

"I learned from the best."
"From the only role model I've had."

Well
I wouldn't tell you

For I'd be at risk of learning more

Crossless

By Timons Esaias

She asked me
quite earnestly
what book I
was reading,

for I'd been reading it
"the whole time"
and that
was a torque
in her world.

Two tables down
the guys were playing chess,
board set up sideways,
the kings --
little crosses long lost --
mistaken for queens.

Up the hill
the university,
slowly shrinking,
folks discussing
which buildings
would make a prison.

Prison is where
you find it
I would say,
but instead I
tell her about
great dreams,
and let the queens
settle in to their
crucial, though less
powerful, new
role.

Itchy Sweater

By Em Fanning

There it is again.

God, I just want to be rid of it!

It doesn't necessarily look bad,

It would look perfect on another!

But it's just not me.

There's no undershirt that I have,

So the straw-like fabric is flush with my flesh.

It's an orange-red, like a thick tomato soup.

I would look so much better in a blue-red.

The collar is too tight and high,

Giving the illusion of a chokehold.

I look shapeless.

I don't look like me.

My parents say that it suits me,

I think they just like it because they bought it.

And, of course, I hear the sound of the sweater again.

Just like every day.

“Emily”

Trust Fall

By Amy Ganser

Balanced on the edge
Of exposed nerves
Aching to be seen
To be understood
Yearning to live
A single moment
In quiet clarity
Staring into an abyss
Of what-ifs and why-nots
Taunted to trust the timing
In this divine design
Wondering
What would happen
If I just...let...go...
And set myself free
Am I afraid of falling?
Or is it flying that I fear?

Advice to a Father

By Mackenzie Hill

Always be home for dinner
Always set the table
Always help Kitty into her highchair
Always say grace
Be sure to kiss mom's hand
Tell her you love her softly
Always feed Kitty first
Always eat everything on your plate
Never leave the table early
Do converse in small talk
Ask your family how their days were
Always stack the plates
Always unbuckle Kitty
Always wash the dishes with mom
Always flick water in her face
Or you won't hear her laugh
All these dinners will pass
All your kids will grow up
So come home for dinner
And tell mom you love her

Grendel's Consideration

By Byron Hoot

Grendel looks at the sky considering
the aching in his knees and shoulders,
wrists and hands as omens he'd prefer
not to know. Thinks of time and its
hideous monstrosity of its end for him.
Thinks of what there is to say and laughs
in mockery of the life he's lead as if
being a monster – wrongly called, he reminds
himself – is worthy of anything. Oh yes,
he mumbles, the word worthy has entered
him. He's heard in dreams, "I am not worthy"
awaking with a battle cry and soaked in sweat.
The serpent of words far more dangerous than
dragon fire, the revenge of stolen treasure
stolen again. Words can never be recovered
once set free in their hissing, haunting reality
of meaning. He stands at the mouth of the cave
at Bear Rock looking down on Hart Hall
and the longing to enter its doors, hear Hrothgar
say, "Hail! My long, lost brother. Join me."
Grendel opens his mouth to roar but stops not
wanting to hear the echo, rubs his knees,

thinks of time and what it does and does not mean.

The sun upon his face.

. . . Then Gone

I thought it was a piece of loose bark
on the shag maple; it was a small gray,
dirty white-chested bird moving.
I caught it in the corner of my eye,
looked, looked away then back
and it was gone. So small a piece
of bark on the tree was a perch
it stood on. A good omen for the day –
to see what could have easily
not been seen. I bowed to the tree,
the bird there then gone.

God is a Woman

By Paige Jubeck

I believe God is a woman.

And not because of

Third-wave feminism.

I believe god is a woman

Because your presence is much,

Much too holy,

To only be angelic.

I believe God is a woman.

And not because of

Religion being far too nuanced.

I believe God is a woman

Because the thought of,

Touching you, Feeling you,

Hearing you, Is heavenly.

I believe that God is a woman

Because if I cannot worship you

The same way that I was brought up

To look at the sky and praise the new day,

I feel like I would be a sinner.

Heroin

By Evie Lindgren

It's only harm, yet rushes of
Relief is all you see and shove
The nameless hurt inside your veins
Allow it lead your life on reigns
And make you think yourself unloved

Engrossed by toxic poisons pave
A way for doom inside a grave
You think it gives you self-control
It's only harm

Today, it's far too late for change
Already lost inside derange
I sit beside your grave and speak
Retaining times I miss and seek
And now the silence feels so strange
It's only harm

Will you see me while I'm here?

By Amelia Litzinger

She leaves leaves on my doorstep like an Autumn harvest.
A breadth of turmoil coiled up in the death and decay.
No longer breathing life or filtering sunlight,
they adorn the threshold we cross on our way to the hearth.

Left behind, I sit and ponder who shall gather me.
Arms bearing me along the breeze and emptying me at the palace of a
godhood.

Desiccate me like pine needles and throw me on the fire.
Sew my mouth shut so my last gasp of agony is only to myself.

Decorate me in inks like chlorophyll.
Hide my reds and browns and yellows beneath a monochrome of green.

Wash me on the shore like the shells of dead sea creatures.
Then bring me home again to the witches cabin, to decorate the garden.

The Other Side

By Chyenne Nelson

When I'm trying to fall asleep, I make myself believe I'm next to somebody. Somebody who cares about me, loves me. Or I make myself believe that on the other side of waking up tomorrow I will be given the presence of someone who cares. I wish the other side was a reality and not something I have to fantasize about to make myself feel calmer before bed. I wish I was on the other side.

We're All His Daughters

By Melayna Pontgratz

The German shepherds no longer prowl.
They doze beside the coop
While the chickens saunter in the yard.

The dogs are gentle, never weak. Their jaws could
Clamp his hand. With muzzles to the ground,
Their act is just the opposite.

Maybe as they sleep there,
They dream of blood on sinking teeth.

One rests her head on my knee.
Her paws dare not leave the ground.
He's trained her well.

She is affectionate at all the right times
In all the right ways. She runs quickly,
Chasing after nothing.

The German shepherds will only be vicious
For show. They will always behave.

We're all his daughters,
We're all his dogs.

Waves Deep

By Christen Rose

The soft yet *broken* girl wondered if peace would find her somewhere in the ocean.

A place deep enough where the eyes could not see, but the heart could still beat.

Laying on her back, the *broken* girl could feel her soul drifting into the hopes of the abyss.

Each desire was in unison with the waves that moved through her fingers and the splashes that tapped her on the neck.

coasting.

Faith had betrayed her, and joy became long-lost.

Sinking.

The soft, *broken* girl was desperately hoping to find peace.

But hopeless enough to believe that peace would find her in the *unknown*.

Sunstar

By Michael Simms

After churning all night
I wake to see the sun star
In the window, its perfect
Blossoms full of light.
I smell coffee and hear you
Moving room to room.
In two weeks, we'll transplant
Our sun star to the front bed
Between the extravagant
Dragon flower and the delicate
Hyacinth which Homer says
Sprang from the blood of a boy
Killed by Zephyr, god of wind.
We'll root the flower well.
White threads of mycelia
Will embrace the tendrils,
Welcoming and nourishing
As we gradually inhabit
Our lives, every morning
Fiercely in love with light

Sea and Storm

By Ivy Smith

When all ships harbored
Only the kelp and collateral damage danced

Beneath her billowing sheet.
Therein cowers a convoluted promise.

In settled sea there is no spectacle
Waves that flow unbattered through time
Won't turn a Trojan hero story into glory.

And wherever the sea drains
They will pour
Calgon and chlorine
Down her throat char her vocal cords.

What is a body thrashing body without a voice?
A kelp-reclaimed battlefield sunk
Without a beheaded ship-wreckage to
Its name.

And her father will pour

Into her cupped wave-hands.

To cradle a story,

Waters memory for mere moments.

Of what her mother

failed to conceive.

CATACHRESES

By Mary Soon Lee

Catabolism: oversized hairball.

Catacomb: tool for grooming kitty.

Catalog: record of rodents caught.

Cataract: performing tomcat.

Catarrh: rumbling rhythmic purr.

Catatonic: medicine for mousers.

Categorize: to classify *Felis catus*.

Caterwaul: wall with cat fresco.

Cation: negatively charged ion.

Catkin: leopards, lions, et al.

Catnap: kidnapping of a pussy.

Catnip: gentle warning bite.

Catsup: light evening snack.

Young Woman at a Window*

By Cynthia Stewart

**Salvador Dali 1925 oil painting*

seen from behind,
 the window wide
open onto cerulean sea

her elbows rest
 on the painted sill,
weight shifted to one

leg, the other flexed, a
 pointed foot touches
the floor, she seems to

lean out, the blue stripes
 of her dress mimic
the soft vertical hang

of curtains, a single
 stripe curves over
the horizon of her rounded

buttocks, raven black
 conch shell curls
nest below her collar

further out a thin
 stretch of green
topped hills frame

a distant sandy shore,
 a solitary sailboat
floats on tranquil blue

a rumpled white towel
 beside her on the sill,
her gaze settled below,

is she smiling
 at the young man
dripping wet who waves,

flashes her a smile,
 will she tempt chance
and toss the towel to him?

someday

By Mary Swope

you won't remember what their voice sounds like

how it felt when they'd hold your hand

what it meant when they said they love you

and it won't hurt

you won't wrack your brain about who they were

you'll be at peace knowing that it *was*

A Week of Cake

By Arlene Weiner

This was the week of treats:
Ruth and Anita visited
from New York, bearing babka,
chocolate swirls dark and strong.

Andi came back from England,
thanked us for moving her car,
gave us an English candy bar.

Stacey stopped by
with blueberry muffins,
couldn't stay, explained
she'd baked them using
the cookbook I gave her.

This week of cake reminds me
of my grandmother
who baked every day,
sent pinwheel cookies
to teachers, gave them
to delivery men,
a currency of kindness.

After so many months
just to have friends
come to the door—
a shower of gold.

My Mother Jean in her 90's

By Christine Aikens Wolfe

You're a gnarled oak
 your bark redolent of adaptability
 heat radiates out
though you seem not to feel heat in yourself.

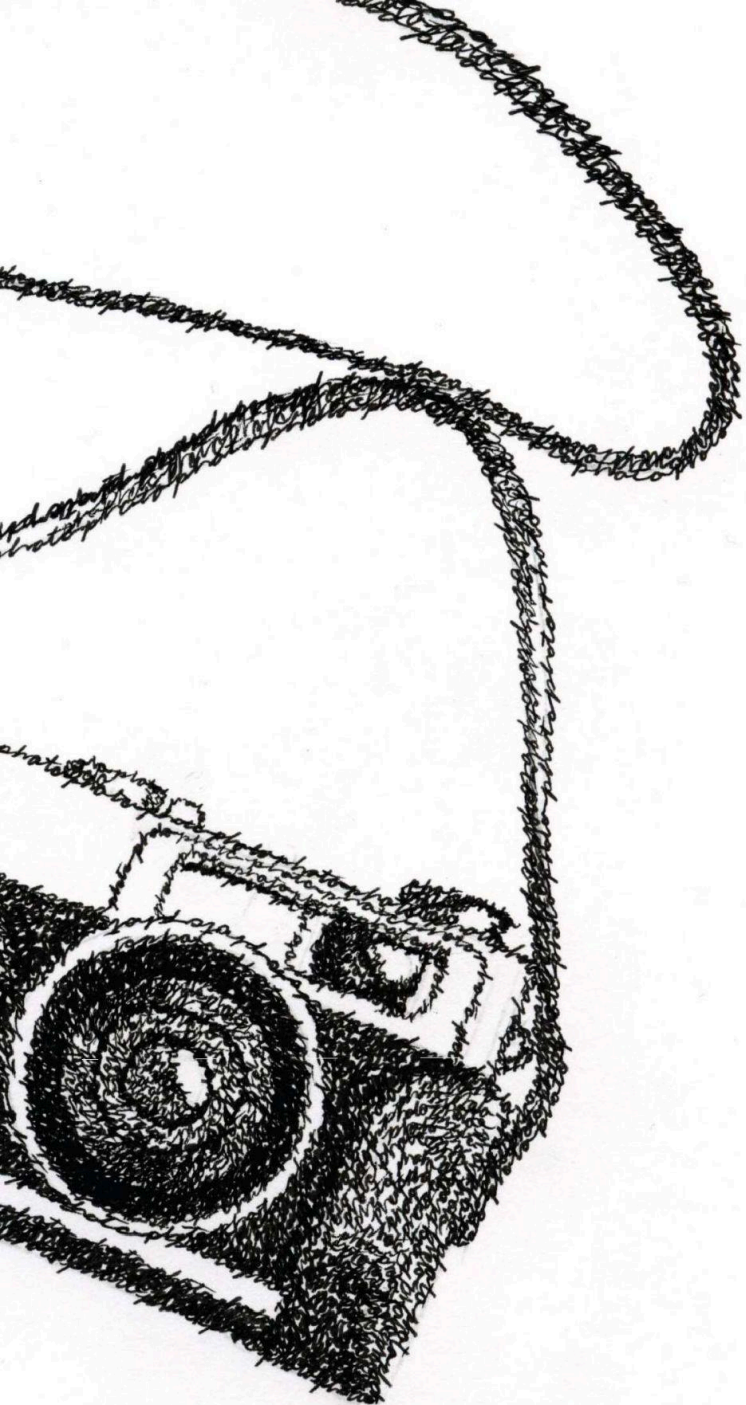
You sway with the wind
 call any day chilly
 all the while providing refuge for those beneath you
dappled sunshine and laughter.

An oak tree venerable wise
 useful even after being cut down.
Likewise, you know your influence
will continue – after you quit life in this form.

Comfort calm wit
 also sure that 92 is a child-like age
 acting on impulse, singing carols
claiming my friends as your own – they're pleased and willing.

If I'm with an acquaintance or friend
 walking in a windy field
 or a sunbaked one
we're delighted to arrive at you, Mother Oak.
Who doesn't love to picnic beneath your branches?

Photography





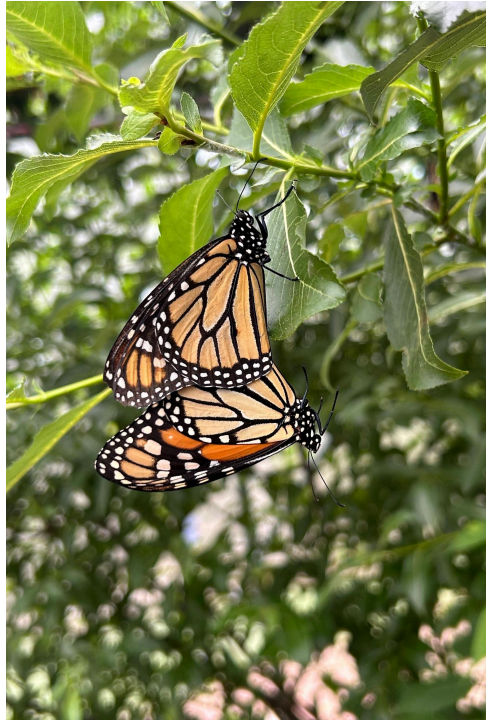
“Across the Field” by Renee Augustine



“Golden Times” by
Christen Rose



“Modern Love” by
Belle DiRenna



“Coerced Courtship” by
Emma Kemp



“Playground Games” by Mackenzie Wilhelm



“basking ambiance” by Tristan West



“Calm before the storm” by Tyler Michael



“Tiny Castle” by Laurel Katzenberger



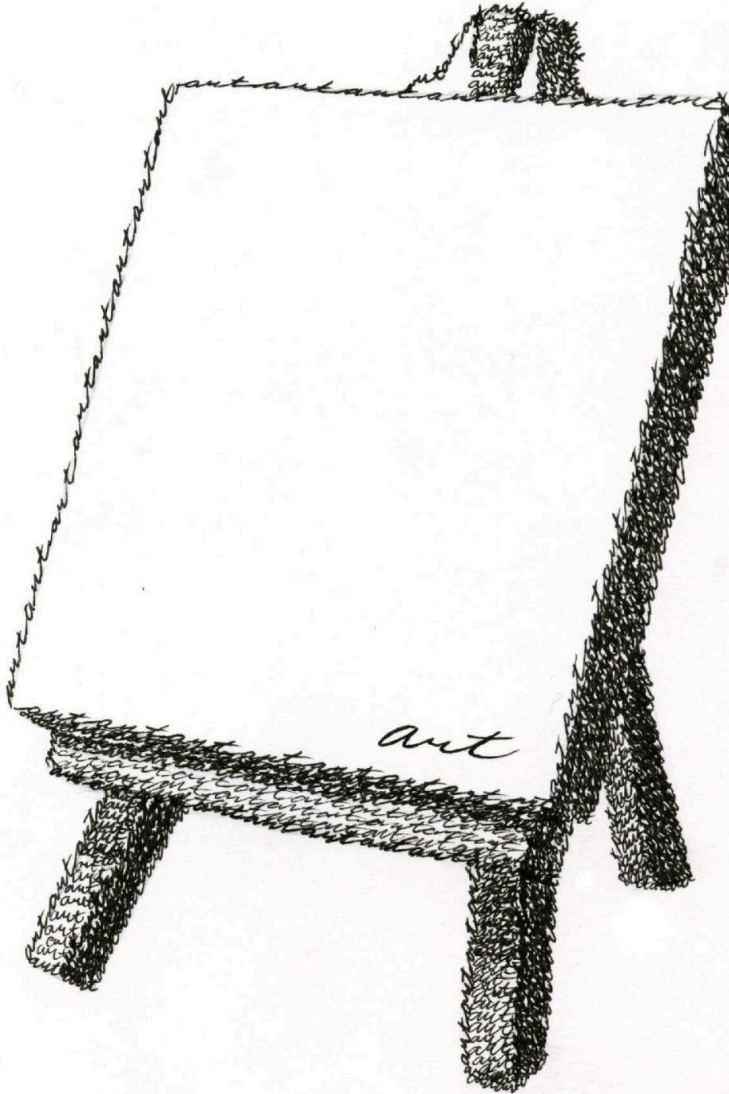
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“Student in the mist” by David Wheeler



“Fluent Shades of Contrast” by Yed Jackson

Art

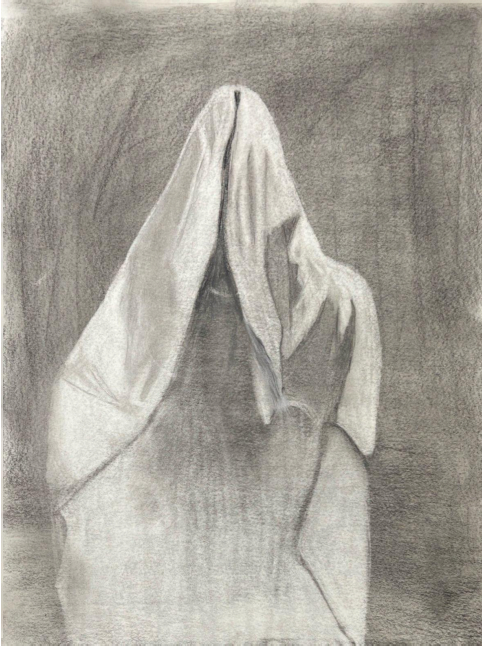




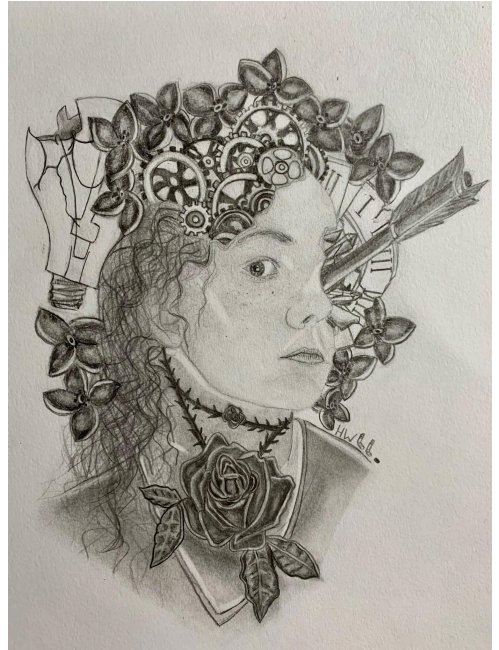
**“Hawk with
Concussion,
August 2023”** by
Amber Holt

“The Jackalope” by
Sara Estus





“What Remains of You” by
Colin Kenny



“Mental Fracture” by
Hayley Whittaker



"Frog Pile" by
Cameron Bakaj

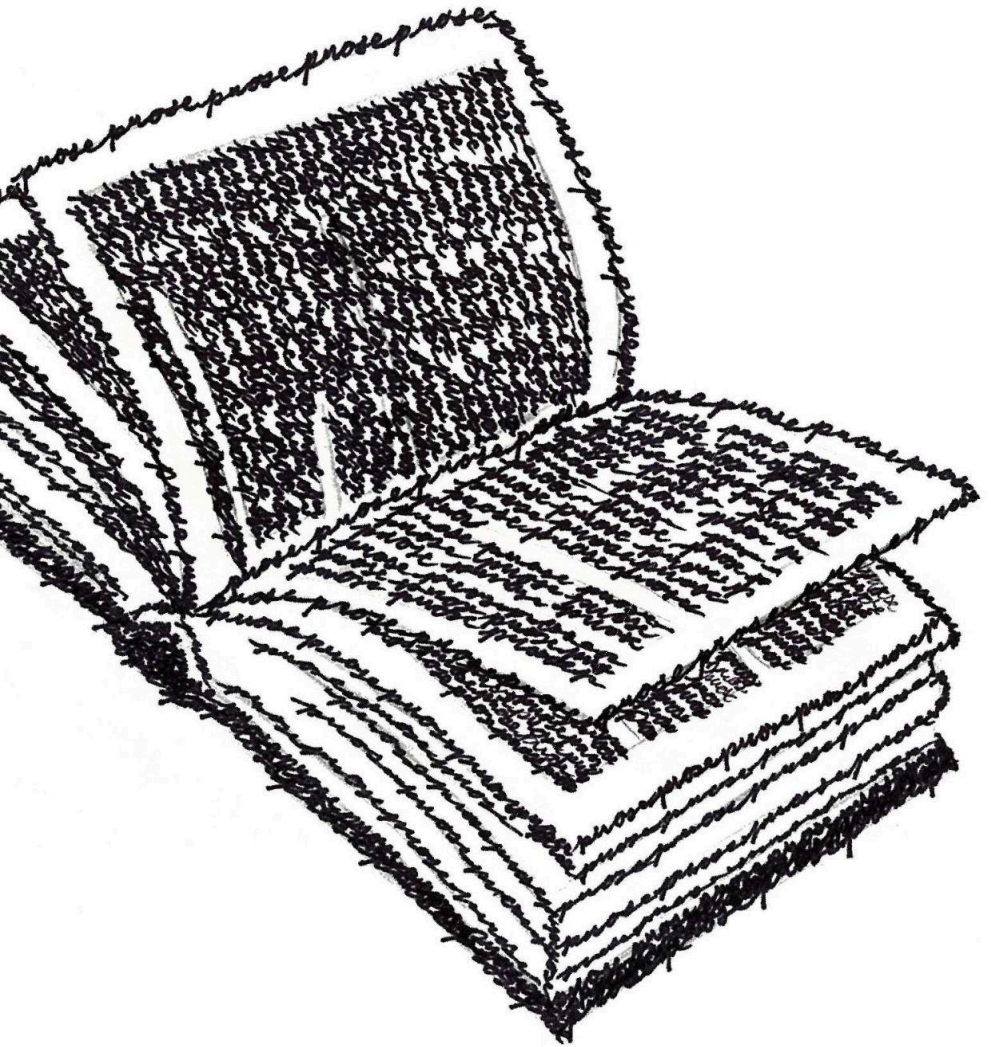
**"All Eyes on
You"** by
Trinity
Miles-Flurry





“bDaAsPsHoNoEn” by Daphne Creamer

Prose



How to Survive a Human Sacrifice

By Adrien Emler

So, you've gotten yourself into a...tricky situation. You're either performing a human sacrifice or you are the human sacrifice. Or you're just preparing yourself in case you're in either of these situations. In that case, good for you. It never hurts to be prepared.

In the case that you're performing the sacrifice, you have a couple things you've gotta do first. Let's say, for simplicity's sake, that you managed to join a cult that does human sacrifices pretty regularly. Did you know that they did human sacrifices? Probably not. If you did, then I'm only slightly concerned. So, you're probably gonna know about this ritual before it happens.

The person who got you into the cult would sit you down. Maybe place an eerily cold hand on your shoulder as they inform you that a human sacrifice is gonna go down in a few days, so you're going to have to start preparing. Thankfully, you're not the one in charge of finding the victim. You just have to kill them. Easy peasy. Oh, right, you're not a psychopathic murderer. My bad. Now you're freaking out about the fact that you literally have to kill someone. I'd advise that you get prepared to run.

Not immediately because that's just predictable. That dude that got you into this situation—whom you probably see as a father figure, depending on your age and father status—is looking at you expectantly. His eyebrows are furrowed and he's got a stern look on his face. Yikes. He's definitely done this before with kids like you, but they decided to run. Luckily enough for you, unlucky for them, you've read this essay and they didn't, so you know to swallow the lump in your throat and nod. He should leave after that, leaving you to start preparing.

You haul ass back home and start packing. You can't skip out on a major cult sacrifice and not expect them to come after you. Thankfully, you joined a cult that only operates locally, and not worldwide, so moving across the state should be fine.

Pack only the essentials. Your cat, clothes, that one comfort item from your childhood that you can't let go of, no matter how dirty it gets. That thing's probably washed to rags by now.

Anyways, once everything is packed up, hide the boxes in the trunk of your car. Cover them up with a tarp or a blanket. Just make sure that your fellow cult members—especially the father figure—don't see them.

Next things next, figure out some temporary living arrangements. Maybe you have some family or friends that'll let you

crash on their couch for a little while. Text them and ask, giving some details as to why you need to move in so suddenly (but don't tell them you were a part of a cult that may or may not come after you. They might say no in the interest of their own safety) and they should let you crash there. Probably. They said they would think about it.

In the meantime, keep going to the cult meetings. You don't want them to suspect that you're going to leave, now, do you, dear reader? That would be just horrible for you. Help out with the preparations and decorations. Who knew that you'd be preparing a human sacrifice like it's a birthday party? Party streamers line the walls and red and black balloons cover the floor. Make small talk with that one creepy dude that all of the ladies in the cult try to avoid. Try not to cry as your father-figure puts a hand on your shoulder and tells you that he's proud of you. Definitely don't cringe as you feel the pain in your back from the muscle you pulled when putting boxes in your car.

Keep that up for the next few days and you should be fine. Finally, it's the day of the ritual. You make your way outside (the clouds are definitely darker than when you went to bed. Maybe it's going to rain later?) and see your father figure leaning on the hood of his 1935 Lincoln Coupe that he parked on your lawn. He calls you over and asks if you're ready to go over and get things done. You insist on taking your own car, but he tells you to get into his. To not arouse suspicion, you're gonna have to go with him and hope that you can find a way to get back to your car before you have to commit murder.

Now, of course, you're in for an awkward car ride. You didn't know that he even knew where you lived. So, you decide to ask how he knew.

He dodges the question.

Weird. You decide to ask about the sacrifice. All he says is that they found someone. Someone that may or may not be you.

Next thing you know, you're being knocked out.

My bad, reader. I probably should have warned you that the father-figure has the job of luring in sacrifices like yourself. But, good news, the next section is all about how to get out of *being* a sacrifice!

There isn't much to say in this category. You mostly just have to fight dirty and haul ass out of there. Obviously, though, it won't be enough, seeing as you've been pretty heavily drugged and are currently tied to the table.

You can always try, right? A kick here, a bite there, but it won't do much. I'd advise you to stop struggling and give in, seeing as there are over 20 people there and you only have, well, you. You, in your drugged out state of mind and sudden heaviness in your arms and legs. You, who was dumb enough to trust a cult while being a, probably, sane human being.

Honestly, I should have told you this earlier, but there's only one way to leave a cult.

And it sure as hell ain't alive.

The Forbidden Fruit

By Demarion Martin

Once upon a time, in a world untouched by the haunting secrets of the forest, there existed a paradise that swept beyond the garden's reach. This realm, bathed in golden sunlight and teeming with life, was a utopia where every being thrived independently. In this outside world, there was no use for the fiddle intricacies of love, as every creature possessed the ability to reproduce without the kindred connection shared between souls.

Amidst the harmonious existence of the paradise, Elara and Eran emerged as anomalies, solitary figures yearning for a connection that transcended the self-sufficient nature of their surroundings. Elara, with eyes that mirrored the sorrowful depths of her soul, was tied to Eran, bearing the weight of unseen sins in the shadows that stalked him.

Their journey began in the bustling village where Elara and Eran were born. At intervals in the chatter of daily life, they engaged in conversations with other villagers, seeking understanding for the longing that set them apart. They shared their dreams of a connection that went beyond mere existence, what they had here in this paradise, was a bond that transcended the pragmatic nature of their world.

Elara, earnest and resolute, spoke with a villager named Lila, a wise woman known for knowing the village's history. "Lila," Elara inquired, "why do me and Eran yearn for a connection that seems to elude us in this beautiful paradise?"

Lila, a wrinkled lady who carried the love and history of so many, replied, "Child, our very world thrives on independence, but the heart seeks what the mind cannot fathom my dear. You see. Love is a longing that defies logic."

Eran, also seeking guidance, turned to a villager named Roderick, known for his battles against the demons of old. "Roderick," Eran questioned, "why do I feel this ache pounding inside my chest, as if there's more to life than what's been told?"

Roderick's eyes twinkled with a hint of mischief, and responded, "Young one, the heart often rebels against the rules of the mundane. Seek the answers beyond this paradise, where the secrets of the forest may hold the key to what you desire."

Despite these insights, Elara and Eran found themselves at odds with their parents. Parents who clung to the village's established norms. A heated exchange unfolded, an argument between a perfect euphony in paradise and the sinful secrets of the garden.

Elara's mother, stern yet loving, admonished, "Reproduction is

the order of our existence dearest. Love, as you perceive it, is a distraction, a deviation from the purpose we serve.”

Eran’s father, a figure hardened by tradition and life, added, “You jeopardize the harmony of the village with your rebellious notions you fools. Repent! It’s finally time for you to conform before the elders cast their judgment and banish you, both!”

Undeterred, Elara and Eran of Paradise, driven by a force stronger than the village’s standard, decided to venture beyond the golden lights of their home. Tears fell from both their eyes, as hatred scorned their faces, while they departed into depths untold.

Now, deep within a haunted forest cloaked in mystery, a large pomegranate tree loomed, casting an unsettling glow on the tangled undergrowth. The air was thick with erring secrets, and a chilling stillness gripped the leaves as if the very trees whispered tales of gruesome truths. From the shadows of the haunted woods emerged Elara, her eyes wells of sorrow, and Eran, a mysterious and elusive figure cursed by his sins. Fate, relentless and cruel had drawn them to the ominous pomegranate tree—an unsettling relic harboring the tale of love entangled with blood.

As the ill-fated lovers stood before the twisted branches, grotesque pomegranates hung like forbidden hearts, dripping with the promise of both pleasure and agony. The legends they heard, spoke of a curse, of a love so damned that only the brutal consumption of the fruit could unveil its true nature.

The twisted truth unfurled as Elara and Eran sunk their hands into the blood-stained pomegranates, the fruit exploded as the seeds fell to the ground, their mouths catching the ones still intact. The taste was a ghastly concoction, of sweetness, and metallic bitterness. With each bite, the very forest seemed to shudder, the cursed roots convulsing in rhythms of melancholy.

Yet, instead of freedom, the lovers found themselves lost in a horrid revelation. The pomegranate’s juice ran like blood down their chins, and the forest echoed with anguished cries. The curse, far from broken, revealed its sinister nature—the lovers were now bound by hunger, a cannibalistic urge that tore through every layer of their beings. Haunted by the horrors unleashed, Elara and Eran faced a horrifying dilemma. The forest, now alive with malevolent whispers, bore witness to their struggles—a song of love and savagery, desire and repulsion. The gnarled branches of the pomegranate tree seemed to dance in approval.

In a twisted moment of realization, the lovers, stained with the evidence of their unholy communion, turned to each other with a predatory hunger in their eyes. The forest, now a silent witness to their descent into madness, seemed to revel in the mutilated spectacle.

Feasting on each other's very reproductive organs, the malformed taboo unfolded, and an unexpected twist occurred. After consuming most of each other, a surge of humanity crawled within them. The curse, it seemed, had extracted its toll, but in doing so, had purged the darkness within them.

Released from the cursed hunger, Elara and Eran hobbled away from the pomegranate tree, the forest still humming remnants of their screams. The forbidden tale, now etched into the deformed roots of the haunted woods, transformed into a cautionary legend—a chilling reminder of what one might pay for love. As they escaped from the confines of the grove, Elara and Eran, though forever scarred, found warmth in their shared ordeal. The forest, now shrouded in eerie silence, whispered of the gruesome love that had unfolded beneath the roots of the monstrous pomegranate tree. And so, hand in hand, they ventured into the unknown, leaving behind a trail of bitter-sweet pomegranate juice. Wrought of nothing but revenge.

Elara and Eran, not of Paradise, but of *Sin* ventured on. Their souls were now forever damaged by the haunting forest's cruel embrace. As they emerged into the grim world beyond, its desolation mirrored the anguish etched upon their faces. The air was thick with an unsettling quietude, devoid of the harmonious hymns of paradise they once knew.

The once-vibrant landscape, now deprived of its golden radiance, sprawled before them like a haunting masterpiece. Skeletal remnants of trees, twisted and forlorn, cast long, eerie shadows upon the desolate ground. This forsaken realm, untouched by the lushness of paradise, starkly contrasted with what they knew of home.

In the aftermath of their mass, Elara and Eran traveled the lifeless expanse, their love forever stained by their desperation and mutilation. The echoes of their shared torment lingered on their breath, a noiseless testament to a love born in the depths of sin.

As they navigated this deserted world, an indescribable weight settled upon them. The eerie glow that once emanated from the pomegranate tree was replaced by an unyielding glow. They were casting long shadows over their fractured and bloodied figures. They could now look deeper into each other, finding solace in themselves.

Yet, the haunting truth lingered—beyond paradise's limits, the world was not only horrifying but condemned them to an eternal void of barrenness. A malevolent twist, gnawing at the peripheries of their sanctified love, resounded with a lament that no longer resonated with the once-sparkling cadence of Paradise.

After walking for days, in the heart of their banishment, Elara and Eran confronted the reality that their union would never ring with the laughter of children. They started to envision the joyous footsteps

of the kids they would have walking through the spirited village gardens. The cruelty of their act is forever a poignant reminder of what was, and what will be.

Together, they treaded through the unforgiving terrain, two souls forever entwined by the darkness they unleashed upon themselves. In the face of this unrelenting world, they clung to the only thing they had left, the twisted love that emerged from the imprisoned roots.

And so, amid the harsh whispers of the wind, Elara and Eran, scarred and childless, continued into the unknown. Coming to terms with being a sinner in trade for love. They looked ahead. The world beyond paradise, unforgiving and relentless, became the canvas for their haunting love—a love marked by the forbidden fruit. Their journey, etched in the annals of tragic tales, breathed a sad refrain: “And they lived, not happily ever after, but for now, in the embrace of their dim love.”

“Grandma, why did Elara and Eran go into the forest if they knew it was forbidden and there was no turning back?”

Grandma’s eyes carried some type of remorse for the ancient tale as she recounted the story. “Elara and Eran, in their search for love beyond the ordinary, ventured into the forbidden forest. Sometimes, dear, the heart’s yearning blinds us to the consequences that lie ahead. The forest, with its haunting secrets, offered them a path unknown, a journey with no turning back. In their pursuit of a love that defied the norms, they found themselves entangled in a fate that forever changed the course of their story,” she said as she turned the light off and closed the door.

A How-to Guide to Growing Up

By Felicity Portoulas

Step One:

Look at your room in disgust. Matted stuffed animals litter the floor and your bed. The felt swan head that hangs over your bed, which is adorned with unicorn sheets, now feels juvenile. The white curtains with pink ruffles that your mom made for you when you were three are now fraying and covered in dust. The mint green toddler dresser that sits across the room is scratched and chipped on every corner. Its drawers sit ajar from overflowing clothes, the majority of which you've now outgrown. On top of the dresser sits a collection of knick knacks that you've either bought or received as presents over the years. A Russian nesting doll here, a piggy bank there, and so on. The place is a mess.

Step Two:

Make the ultimate decision to grow up. You're in sixth grade now, so things will have to change. No more knick knacks, no more useless stuffed animals, and no more baby furniture. As you walk towards your dresser to get started on cleaning the overstuffed drawers, you glance out your window. Your neighbors, who are significantly younger than you, are outside playing with foam swords and makeshift battle armor constructed from bike helmets and tinfoil. You begin to turn on your heel to go ask your parents if you can play with them, but you then remember the decision you made. Part of it includes no longer playing silly games with little kids. Slowly, you close the blinds, the sunlight disappearing, and stroll away to begin your journey to maturity.

Step Three:

Run downstairs and grab all of the garbage bags you can find under your kitchen sink. You end up grabbing three humongous, black "Glad" bags that could fit your entire doll house inside. That's another item you'll have to consider storing. You start off by crouching in the small corner of space near the striped bean bag filled with stuffed animals. It was the only way you could keep and store all of them, and it would hurt the animals' feelings if you got rid of them, right? The second you manage to unzip the overstuffed bean bag (it's supposed to fit everything, yet you managed to prove the company's claim wrong), all of the animals tumble out. There's a giant brown spotted horse that you bought with your birthday money at "Toys R' Us," a blue teddy bear holding a heart with the word "love" embroidered on it, a heap of Beanie Boos, and that's only the beginning. As you dig deeper, you find your mom's worn and torn stuffed animals from when she was a

kid that lived in your grandma's basement for 20 years: a tiger, a matted lamb, etc. Your mom wanted her to get rid of them, but you decided to take them off of your grandma's hands. Mom was not happy about the new addition of stuffed animals to your room. Along with her toys are ones from when you were a baby: a purple bunny, a lamb, a rabbit with a nightcap that recited The Lord's Prayer when you pressed its stomach, and many more.

Step Four:

It takes an hour and a half to clean out the stuffed animals. In the end, only about 25 percent of them have been placed in the donate pile, 25 percent in the "maybe" pile (all of which you know you'll end up keeping), and 50 percent in the keep pile. Each stuffed animal that has made its way to the donate pile is given a long explanation about how they deserve better than you and how you'll always love them. You imagine that they understand and accept their fate. It's basically a breakup but with stuffed animals. You proudly show your parents the one full garbage bag, and, as much as they would like for you to get rid of all of the stuffed animals, they'll take this as a win and a step in the right direction. You pick up the now heavy garbage bag and heave it into the hallway next to all of the other donate items (clothes, old decorations, etc.), making the decision final.

Step Five:

Over the span of a year, you do your best to continue growing up. Your parents agree to help transform your room into a teenage sanctuary. The mint green dresser is now gone and replaced with a sleek white design with multiple sliding drawers. The curtains are swapped out with artsy watercolor drapery panels. The swan head is taken down and replaced with a wooden oval flower painting. The wall behind your bed is now covered in spotted wallpaper. Pictures of Harry Styles, typewriters, and swimmers now cover the walls. A pink eggshell chair now sits where the bean bag used to be. The biggest difference, though: no stuffed animals on the floor. Over the span of a few months, almost all of them have made their way to the donation pile. Now, only seven of them sit on your new pink comforter.

The neighbors knock on your door every day, but every time you say "no." Eventually, you get tired of them knocking and stop answering the door entirely. Why can't they understand that you're too old to play with them?

Step Six:

Another year passes as you go through the motions of life: eat, attend school, do homework, go to swim practice, sleep, repeat.

One day, after school, your black Mercedes-Benz pulls into the long blacktop hill that acts as your driveway. After another dreary day of being a teenager, you scroll on Instagram and pay no attention to

the outside world. That is, until your parents tell you to get your nose out of your phone and get out of the car. You put your phone into your pocket and look out the dashboard window. In the yard next door to your house, the neighbors chase each other with plastic lightsabers, swing on the play set, and tumble down the slide. They laugh and smile and pay no attention to your car pulling into the driveway. They don't ask you to play like they used to. In fact, they don't even glance over at you. Instead, they pretend that you don't even exist.

For some reason, you feel upset by the fact that they don't acknowledge your arrival like they used to. For a second, you feel the urge to drop your backpack and run straight over to them to play, but this thought comes with a reminder.

You can't play with them anymore. You're too old.

Reality strikes you like a hammer to the head. You've missed your chance. The neighbor kids and the stuffed animals have accepted that you've grown up, so why can't you?

Hunting Season

By Mackenzie Wilhelm

The diner is bustling for a Friday afternoon. My fingers smooth through my hair to hide the aftermath of wearing a fluorescent beanie the entire morning. A man dressed similarly in camouflage is waiting for me outside the diner. His head nods as a sign of recognition, my boots thudding against the pavement as I approach him.

“Hey, buddy,” Paul greets me. I don’t outright dislike him. We only share two things in common: our wives are sisters, and we both enjoy hunting. There’s little time for conversation in the deer stands, which is why I tolerate him.

“Hey.” My tone is flat, but that doesn’t dissuade Paul.

“Are you hungry? I’m starving,” Paul turns his back to me and rambles. I follow him through the diner’s door. “Maybe I’ll try today’s special with a hot coffee to switch it up. Or should I go with something more classic? I had their hashbrowns once, and John! You wouldn’t believe how good they were. Especially with a side of ham? Oh, it was...”

Once we enter the second set of doors, I can hardly hear Paul over the commotion. Plates clacking together, the distant sizzle of a hot grill, and background conversation make it easy to tune Paul out. “Are you listening to me, John?” He looks over his shoulder and confronts me.

“Of course,” I nod with a smile. “There’s an open booth back in the corner.” Paul follows my eyes and nods in agreement. Paul sits across from me with his back turned to the open diner. Before he can audibly ruminate about his brunch choices, a waitress comes by. She places two menus on the laminate tabletop and whips out a heavily used writing pad.

“What can I get started for you boys?”

Paul glances at the menu before meeting the waitress’ eyes. “I think I’ll start with a coffee,” he says.

—*—

The loud thrumming from the engine and the crunch of gravel lull me into serenity. The sun vanished past the horizon long ago, leaving me to drive through nightfall. I slow to a stop once my headlights illuminate a quaint cabin and shed. I maneuver the truck’s bed to be as close to the shed’s entrance as possible. It was a challenge to hoist the stag into the back with two people in the first place. It was going to feel impossible with only one now.

The truck’s gate lowers with a thud. After a bumpy ride, the stag slid further into the bed. The shed’s single lightbulb flickers and

barely provides any light. I hoist myself into the bed and grab a fistful of tarp before pulling. The stag hardly moves. I huff and yank again at the material, but it seems futile. I drop out of the bed and move into the shed, looking for a rope to jury-rig some pulley system to remove the stag. The shed is a scattered mess of various tools, but there's no rope. It could be in the house, and there's only one way to check.

When I open the door, I'm greeted with the squeals of recognition. "Daddy!" My daughter bolts off the living room couch, away from her mother, and charges at me. I drop to one knee and scoop her up in my arms. She wraps her tiny arms around my neck and giggles when I stand on both feet and spin us around.

I shift my daughter to my side, kissing the crown of her head after doing so. Thoughts of retrieving the rope forgo my mind. "Do you wanna see what daddy caught?" The words make her ecstatic, her eyes lighting up in wonder. She nods in excitement. I carry her through the door and out to the truck, keeping both hands on her so I don't drop her.

When we get to the truck, I'm dumbfounded. The stag is *gone*. The truck bed is covered in enormous claw marks, scattered tufts of hair, and pieces of meat. It looks like the deer spontaneously combusted. I cover my daughter's eyes and maneuver to the truck's passenger door. I needed my rifle. "Daddy?" Her voice whimpers, and I hush her. I grab the gun and slam the door shut, rushing back into the house with my daughter.

The front door slams shut behind me, and my wife jumps. I urgently hand our daughter to her. "Go to our bedroom and lock the door right now." My voice shakes, "Do not come out under any circumstances."

"John, you're scaring me." My wife comforts our daughter, "What's going on?"

"Baby, *please*. Go, now!" The front door is deadbolt shut, and I close all the curtains. "Now!" I turn around and shout, watching my girls devolve into crying messes. My heart is ready to leap out of my chest from the anxiety. My grip on the rifle is unsteady as I sit in the living room and wait.

It's quiet. My ears strain for any clue of life outside, but not even the cicadas are chirping. I'm so familiar with the sound of my blood pumping that I don't notice a light tapping beginning. The curtains are shut as my brain processes what could be making this sound. It's rhythmic and continuous, making the hairs stand on the neck. Through the glass, I hear a muffled voice. "*John*," more tapping, "*John, are you in there? I need help.*" It's Paul.

I get off the couch, still holding my rifle, and approach the curtains. There are tremors in my hands as I grip the curtain and pull it to the side. Instead of the friendly face I saw at the diner, it's the stag. I

recoil in horror, falling flat on my butt and staring at the creature looming above. The skin around the snout and mouth is gone, leaving exposed bone. Its maw is dripping with blood and saliva. White, pin-point pupils stare back when I look the thing in the eyes. It breathes against the glass. Hot breath fogs its appearance, but a thick tongue swipes at the condensation.

“What the fuck?!”

The creature opens its mouth, revealing far too many teeth. The bone is serrated, a tell-tale sign of a predator who rips prey apart. I cover my ears when it begins screeching, my gun clattering to the floor beside me. I scream with the creature, feeling blood drip from my ears. The bay window explodes into shards, and the noise stops. I grab my gun while scrambling back from the open window.

Two clawed hands grip the window frame as the creature enters the living room. Glass crunches under its large feet as it puffs at me. It stands with a hunch, far too large to stand upright in the house. I point my rifle at the beast and fire a shot. The creature doesn't react, instead making a strained sound akin to laughter. “What do you want from me?!”

When it opens its mouth, saliva drips down its chin. “*I want your flesh.*” The imitation of Paul's voice is replaced with a raspy, guttural one. “*I...hunger.*”

I pull the gun's trigger and fire another shot, aiming at the creature's head. It sharply turns away in pain and hisses. There's a small hole gushing black blood from its head. I attempt to aim again, but the beast swipes the gun from my hands, and I watch it fly into the next room. “*You will pay.*” It touches the bleeding wound and stares at the liquid. “*I will save you for last.*”

I clamber to my feet and stand before the beast. “You won't hurt my family.” It pulls its hand back and goes for my head, but I raise my arms before it connects. The pain is instantaneous as claws slice through delicate flesh. I can't help but turn away. There's another blow to my side as the creature continues its onslaught against my body. The force from the impact sends me to the ground, where the beast steps forward and lands on my leg.

I scream with all my might. The wretched beast places more weight on its foot as it flattens my leg. “Stop, stop, stop!”

The soft padding of feet against hardwood approaches. “Daddy?” I hear her voice *behind* me. My head strains to maneuver to face my daughter, tears blurring my vision as she stands there confused.

“*Watch.*” The creature demands. My wife rushes out of the room, grabbing our daughter's arm and pulling, but the creature is faster. It lurches forward, grabbing Sarah's other arm and yanking. The

arm pops from the socket and rips off. My daughter screams at the top of her lungs as I lay there and sob.

I'm dreaming. I have to be dreaming.

I hear my wife running for the door but can't outrun this nightmare. The beast catches up and swipes her body into the living room wall. She hits the wall hard and moans from the pain. The creature ensures I can see everything as it grabs my wife and hoists her upright. She chokes against its grasp, kicking and scratching to no avail. In one swift flick, it slices open her belly, and I close my eyes before hearing her entrails hit the ground.

I keep my eyes shut, listening to sounds of crunching and slurping. Between the sounds, I hear rhythmic dripping near me. I dare to open my eyes and see a small pool of blood on the ground. The source of the blood dripping is a scalped skin with long hair still attached to it, stuck to the ceiling, among other pieces of flesh. All I can do is cry. A slick hand grabs me by my hair, forcing me to open my eyes and face the creature. "*I am going to savor this.*"

The landline rings in the kitchen. Initially ignored, but the constant ringing repeats on a loop. A red-stained hand picks up the handset.

"Hello?"

"Hey, John. Have you finished harvesting that stag yet? I was wondering if you could bring me and the wife some venison." Paul's voice sounds static through the phone.

"It's already done. When can you come by?"

"It's rather late, don't you think? I mean, jeez, I didn't think you'd be done already. I'll be up Saturday morning for—..." The handset is placed back into place before Paul can ramble further. Footsteps lumber toward the living room, glass crunching under the weight as they near the destroyed window. Hands and feet clamber through the opening as the creature wanders into the forest. There is always room for more.

The only house on W Alison WY

By Aydden Yope

Growing up, we never went near west Alison way. In fact, for the twenty long years I lived in that town, I doubt I ever saw one person go down west Alison.

Now, this wasn't for any strange reason. There were no campfire stories or superstitions centered around the place. It was just simply a very unremarkable street. Nobody lived on it, and the dirt path managed to very effectively blend into the scenery of our rural town.

To say the road served no purpose at all, of course, would be lying. There was exactly one house on west Alison. A rundown two-story house which no one had called home for a very long time.

Finally, I decided to see for myself what the road led to. Only about 3 years ago now, when I was visiting my parents. I only noticed the road when I saw it marked on the map I had been using. Having not been in town for a while, I figured it must be a new development, surely I would have remembered if it had really been there all those years.

Of course, this was not the case. Passing by the overgrown dirt path that now stands where the slightly less overgrown dirt path once stood, I realized that this road had always been here, waiting and watching. This mysterious road had watched me grow up for so many years, and I still had no idea what it led to.

I don't know exactly what possessed me at that moment, but I had to know what was hiding in the brush. Early next morning I took a walk all the way down to west Alison. As much as I loved my parents' truck, it would never fit in such a narrow and curved dirt path.

The woods have always annoyed me, being full of plants that scratch and animals that bite. Once, I had a pair of pants that was so covered in burs that I had to completely toss it after just one walk in the woods.

The trees surrounding west Alison were different. Somehow, it seemed more inviting. These woods told me they were full of plants that soothe and animals that purr. Even better, for the whole walk down the path I didn't encounter a single bur.

The walk was entirely pleasant, and I could hardly believe I went my entire childhood so close yet just barely avoiding this paradise practically in my own backyard. Cresting the hill that the street is set upon, my eyes finally fell on the house at the summit. For every bit of pleasant that the path was, it all fell away the moment I saw the house.

If the woods were watching my childhood like a guardian angel, the house was watching like a predator ready to pounce. Its

jagged broken windows bared their teeth at me. Its front doorway, which had long lacked a door, yawned into the open.

The same force that compelled me to go down the path in the first place continued pushing me closer and closer to the house, this time more forcefully. When I got to the front porch of the dilapidated house, hesitation finally gave way to curiosity.

The inside of the house was typical enough, at least from what I could see from the porch. Rectangular marks lined the walls where paintings had once been hung. A staircase loomed at the opposite end of the hallway. Braving a step inside the house, I looked through a nearby doorway to see a fireplace and apparently a long-abandoned armchair.

I could imagine the stories told in that chair, a grandparent reliving their memories in front of a circle of enraptured children, with the fireplace lit up behind them. Suddenly, the house seemed less foreboding than before.

Satisfied finally with what I had found, and with a glance at the time revealing it had already been an hour, I decided to head back home. The walk back was more pleasant, and the woods were again kind and welcoming. From then on, anytime I was in town I never again overlooked West Alison.

I never did make that walk again, though. I believe that since then, the only house on West Alison Way has finally been demolished. The most unremarkable house, it seemed, was full with the most remarkable memories.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Nidhi Agrawal - BEEHIVE (Poetry)

Nidhi, who grew up in India, focuses on issues of emotional and physical trauma in her poetry. She strongly believes that poetry is a source of joy, pain, and wonder—a tool that keeps her going in life—and is driven by the intense physical and emotional trauma she encountered through her medical condition.

Nidhi's writings have been featured by *Ars Medica* (Literary Journal sponsored by Mount Sinai Hospital, Humber School for Writers, and the Program for Narrative and the Healthcare Humanities at the University of Toronto), *Laurel Review*, *Altadena Libraries* (Altadena Poetry Review 2024 Anthology), University of North Dakota, Project Muse sponsored by John Hopkins University, Hobart Books, Writing Center at Washtenaw Community College (WCC), University of Illinois at Chicago, BYU College of Humanities and the Department of English, The University of Pennsylvania, Quadrant Australia, University of California, Riverside, Chicago School of Arts, Lewis Clark State College's literary journal, St. Francisco University, Xavier Review Press, California State Poetry Society, The University of Tennessee, *Chronogram Magazine*, *Letters* (Yale University), *Anodyne Magazine*, *Setu Journal*, *South Asian Today*, *Indian Periodical*, *Garland Magazine*, *Muse India*, etc. She is the author of 'Confluence' and an esteemed contributor to the 'Suicide Volume 2 Poetry Collection' & 'Anodyne'.

Renee Augustine - Across the Field (Photography)

Renee Augustine practices photography as a hobby in her spare time. She has expanded her love for photography over the past several years and enjoys taking pictures of landscapes, nature scenes, and abandoned structures. Her campera is a staple piece of equipment in her vehicle as one never knows when a photo opportunity may arise. She has photographed all over the country and is excited to continue her journey in photography.

Cameron Bakaj - Frog Pile (Art)

Cameron Bakaj is in her final semester of her MS in Instructional Leadership. She loves to create art using different mediums, and would describe her art style as realism, but loves to play with surrealism ideas.

You can find more of her art on her Instagram @cameronbakajart, her TikTok @cammy_buckeye, or her Facebook at Cameron Bakaj Art.

Mary Bartels - Ambrosia & Nectar (Poetry)

Mary Bartels is an emerging writer from Fair Oaks, PA. She enjoys creating poetry, all kinds of fiction, and creative nonfiction. Her work has been accepted into Rune Literary Magazine and the award-winning literary journal, *Pulp*. She also writes and produces radio pieces with Saturday Light Brigade Radio. Mary can be reached at marymirembartels@gmail.com

Jayden Baysore - “in the place where quiet things lie” (Poetry)

Jayden Baysore is a Sophomore English Major at Robert Morris University who loves reading, writing, philosophy, and Science Fiction. This is his second year being on staff and first year being published in *Rune*. He harbors ambitions to work on more extensive literary works and projects. He has also been a part of a literary podcast series, interviewing regional authors.

Jay Carson - Watching the Wasps Die (Poetry)

Jay Carson, holds a doctorate in English from Carnegie-Mellon University. He taught for many years at Robert Morris University where he was a founding advisor to the literary magazine, *Rune*. He has published more than 100 poems and a number of short stories and essays in local and national journals, magazines, and collections. Jay is also the author of *Irish Coffee* (Coal Hill Press) and *The Cinnamon of Desire* (Main Street Rag). He is presently working on a memoir. Jay considers his work Appalachian, accessible, the ongoing problem-solving of a turbulent life, and just what you might need.

Sabine Cherenfant - ON LEARNING AND FORGIVING (Poetry)

Sabine Cherenfant is a Robert Morris University Alumna. She currently works as an audience development manager at Mansueto Ventures, the

parent company of *Inc.* and *Fast Company*. Her work has previously appeared in *Rune*, *Fast Company*, *The Collegiate Scholar*, *Thoughts on Journalism*, and *Quartz*.

Michael Comiskey - Procrastination (Poetry)

Michael Comiskey is a retired professor of political science and economics at the Penn State Fayette Campus near Uniontown, Pennsylvania. He lives in his native Connellsville, Pennsylvania with his wife Mary Ann. He started writing poems at age fifty. His website is <https://michaelswriting.com/> and his email is cmc2@psu.edu.

Sarah Cowan - Remembrance (Poetry)

Sarah Cowan is a student majoring in Writing & Publishing at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. Her work will appear in PULP magazine, and her favorite genre is horror. She is skilled at writing fiction but enjoys various styles like poetry and creative nonfiction. In her free time, she takes an interest in music and photography.

Daphne Creamer - bDaAsPsHoNoEn (Art)

Daphne is a junior Interdisciplinary Studies Major focusing on the intersections between art, music, and history. She enjoys painting, playing her bassoon, and, most recently, taking photographs in her Digital Photography course.

Amy Crutchfield - “To Be Human” (Poetry)

Amy is a transfer student majoring in English with the intent of earning a Master’s after earning her Bachelor’s. Her first love is poetry, so she hopes to one day teach it. In the past she has served as secretary of CCBC’s Creative Writing Club and has been involved in creative writing groups outside of school as well. She was raised in South Carolina and currently resides in Moon Township.

Shaheen Dil - The First Perfect Number (Poetry)

Shaheen Dil is a retired academic, banker and consultant who now devotes herself to poetry. She was born in Bangladesh, and lives in

Pittsburgh. Her poems have been widely published in literary journals and anthologies. She has published two full-length books of poetry, *Acts of Deference* (Fakel 2016) and *The Boat-maker's Art* (Kelsay Books 2024.) Shaheen is a member of the Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange, the DVP/US1 Poets, and the Porch Poets. She holds an AB from Vassar College, a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University, and a Ph.D. from Princeton University.

Belle DiRenna - Modern Love (Photography)

Annabelle DiRenna is a Photography and Cinema student at Robert Morris University. She has been doing photography professionally for 5 years now

Ziggy Edwards - Teachings of a Derelict Property (Poetry)

Ziggy Edwards lives in Pittsburgh and edits the online zine *Uppagus*. Ziggy's poems and short stories have appeared in publications including *5 AM*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Grasslimb*, and *Dreams & Nightmares*.

Adrien Emler - Me and You (Poetry) and How to Survive a Human Sacrifice (Prose)

Adrien Emler is a freshman at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School in Midland, PA. He majors in Writing and Publishing. Adrien enjoys writing short pieces of fiction that can often be categorized in the horror genre. When he's not writing, he enjoys playing video games with his two brothers and hanging out with his cat, Nugget.

Timons Esaias - Crossless (Poetry)

Timons Esaias is a satirist, writer and poet living in Pittsburgh. His works, ranging from literary to genre, have been published in twenty-two languages. He has been a finalist for the British Science Fiction Award, and he won the *Winter Anthology* Contest, the SFPA Poetry Contest, and the Asimov's Readers Award (twice). He was shortlisted for the 2019 Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. His full-length Louis-Award-winning collection of poetry -- *Why*

Elephants No Longer Communicate in Greek -- was brought out by Concrete Wolf.

Sara Estus - The Jackalope (Art)

Sara Estus is a sophomore graphic design major who has a passion for creating art based on plants and animals, she creates art primarily from acrylics or through sculpture - but recently she has experienced more digital art through her graphic design classes, with her new favorite being digital animation.

Em Fanning - Itchy Sweater (Poetry)

Em Fanning is a cybersecurity major at Robert Morris University. She is studying digital forensics and criminal justice, and plans to (hopefully) work in a government agency. She enjoys poetry as a pastime and as a journaling method.

Amy Ganser - Trust Fall (Poetry)

Amy Ganser is a Pittsburgh native and administrative professional who briefly served the RMU School of Informatics, Humanities, and Social Sciences and the RMU COVID Testing program. While she always loved words, it took until 2021 to start writing poetry as a serious endeavor. Since 2021, her poetry has been published in RENE as well as *Celestite Online Journal*, in Medium publications *Know Thyself Heal Thyself*, *IPoetry*, *Lifeline*, *Write Under the Moon*, and *The Power of Poetry*, and in the Move Me Poetry anthology *We Are the Waves* released in November 2023. Her personal collection, *You Were Always Meant to Dance* is set to be published later in 2024.

Mackenzie Hill - Advice to a Father (Poetry)

Mackenzie Hill is a senior English major at RMU. She has minors in Creative Writing and Professional Writing. Additionally, she is president of RMU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta (The International English Honor Society), treasurer of RMU's chapter of PRSSA (Public Relations Student Society of America), and the managing editor of *Rune* for the second consecutive year. Her career aspirations are to be a published writer.

Amber Holt - Hawk with Concussion, August 2023 (Art)

Amber Holt is an artist and graphic design student at Robert Morris University, where she is also a design manager for Rune. Balancing roles as both a designer and an artist, Amber's professional pursuits and artistic exploration constantly influence each other. When it comes to art, Amber's go-to mediums are graphite and scratchboard, the subjects depicted often reflecting her life experiences. If you wish to see more of her art, you can follow Amber @amberrrr_art on Instagram.

Byron Hoot - Grendel's Consideration (Poetry)

Byron Hoot was born and raised in Appalachia. Left. And returned and lives in The Wilds of Pennsylvania. Retired. He is a nemophilist: One who is fond of forests or forest scenery. A haunter of the woods. Someone who regularly spends time in a particular place. This is not escapism. It is in the tradition of Thoreau, Leopold, Berry and others who see our humanness in our response to the land. How we treat the land as a reflection of how we treat ourselves and others. The responsibilities inherent from our first to our last breath. The privilege of being alive. So write of what I know in hope of a "new heaven and earth" where we can be the brothers and sisters we are.

Yed Jackson - Fluent Shades of Contrast (Photography)

Yed Jackson is a 20 year old RMU student currently undergoing his BSBA in pursuit of a successful career in management. Yed recently begun his photography career last summer at his home of Philadelphia. Nature, Lifestyle, Street and Sport photography are all under the umbrella of Yed's interest and his love for beauty is why he is so keen to taking pictures .

Paige Jubeck - God is a Woman (Poetry)

Paige Jubeck is a senior Secondary English Education major at RMU. She is in her final semester and is currently a student teacher at Cornell High School. She works a full time job on top of this, but if you find

her in her sparse free time, you will see her never miss out on reading and writing for fun. Paige's favorite style of writing is poetry, but she is not limited to it. This is why she adores *Rune* and is so proud to be one of the social media coordinators as well as a contributor.

Laurel Katzenberger - Tiny Castle (Photography)

I'm Laurel. I am a senior nursing student. This past May, I took a trip to Ireland. The Green Isle lives up to its name.

Emma Kemp - Coerced Courtship (Photography)

Emma Kemp is a senior Biology major at Robert Morris University. She has worked on the *Rune* staff for two years as a Layout Manager. She is the Publicity Chair of the National Society of Leadership and Success chapter at RMU, as well as an active member in Sigma Tau Delta, Biology Club, and the Red Cross. In her free time, Emma enjoys reading, baking, and spending time outdoors.

Colin Kenny - What Remains of You (Art)

Colin Kenny is an aspiring sophomore creative here at RMU. Majoring in UX/UI, his artistic disciplines include drawing with a charcoal medium, video editing, photography, and theater, recently involved in RMU's production of "Heathers: The Musical." He is honored to have been given the opportunity to share his work.

Evie Lindgren - Heroin (Poetry)

Evie Lindgren is an emerging writer from Pittsburgh. She is a 15-year old Writing and Publishing major at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School. Her favorite genre is horror, and she likes reading Stephen King books. Also she enjoys writing poems any chance she gets. When she's older, she aspires to be a therapist, lawyer, teacher, or author.

Amelia Litzinger - Will you see me while I'm here?

(Poetry)

Amelia Litzinger is a nonbinary trans person living in Pittsburgh, PA., which they have called home for most of their life. They are a mother, a chef, and a poet, all of which they consider to be an art form.

Demarion Martin - The Forbidden Fruit (Prose)

Demarion Martin is a passionate writer hailing from the charming town of New Castle. As a prominent member of the Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School Writing Department, his dedication to the craft of storytelling shines through in every word he pens. Demarion's insightful perspectives on diversity and inclusion have found a home in his column, "Dealing with Diversity," featured in the award-winning publication "The Siren." With a keen eye for detail and a commitment to fostering dialogue on important social issues, Demarion Martin continues to make his mark on the literary landscape, one thought-provoking piece at a time.

Tyler Michael - Calm before the storm (Photography)

Tyler is a Junior environmental science major from Pittsburgh, PA. He is vice president of the Students for Environmental Awareness club. He has had a lifelong interest in nature. He has been doing photography for 4 years and often incorporates his love for the outdoors in his work. His other outdoor hobbies include skiing and mountain biking.

Trinity Miles-Flurry - All Eyes on You (Art)

Trinity Miles-Flurry is an 18-year-old artist based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who works with various genres. She has submitted her work to a few in-school competitions where she has placed in the top 5. She also earned a special merit award in a Phipps Conservatory Fairchild Challenge and had her artwork displayed there. She hopes to sell more art pieces as she has sold a few before in-person and through commissions online. She puts a lot of effort into honing in on her skills and plans to show representation as a Black artist in the LGBTQ+ community and depict how creativity speaks volumes.

Chyenne Nelson - The Other Side (Poetry)

Chyenne Nelson is a junior in RMU's Cinema and Photography B.A. major. Chyenne also has an associate degree in Specialized Studies from Community College of Beaver County. She is most interested in writing in a different type of genres, but her favorites are thrillers and suspense, much like her favorite ones to read. She wishes to pursue a career writing books and movies.

Melayna Pongratz - We're All His Daughters (Poetry)

Melayna Pongratz is a senior English and photography student at Robert Morris University. They primarily write poetry and creative nonfiction, and they enjoy blending photography and other visual art with writing. Regardless of genre, their work focuses on topics such as queerness, family, self-acceptance, grief, and religion. Their first publication, a poem titled "Patriarch," appeared in the 2023 edition of *Rune*. In the future, they hope to find their home in an artistic community. For now, when not writing or taking photos, they spend their time at coffee shops, on the phone with their mom, or napping with their cat, Scout.

Felicity Portoulas - A How-to Guide to Growing Up (Prose)

Felicity Portoulas is an emerging writer from Baden, Pennsylvania. Her writing has recently been accepted for publication in the book, *A Celebration of Poets* and the literary magazine, *Pulp*. You can learn more about her @felicitypwrites on Instagram.

Christen Rose - Golden Times (Photography) and Waves Deep (Prose)

Christen is a graduate student at Robert Morris University, studying Organizational Leadership. She is also a member of Alpha Chi National College Honor Society, an Associate Editor for RUNE and works as an Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admission at Carnegie Mellon University. Christen enjoys being adventurous, art, kayaking, and spending time with her family and friends.

Michael Simms - Sunstar (Poetry)

Michael Simms is the founder/editor of *Vox Populi*, an online forum for poetry, politics and nature, as well as the founder/editor emeritus of Autumn House Press, a nonprofit publisher of books. He's the author of three full-length collections of poetry published by Ragged Sky Press: *American Ash*, *Nightjar*, and *Strange Meadowlark*. Simms has three novels published by Madville: *Bicycles of the Gods*, *The Green Mage* and *Windkeep*, and another novel *The Blessed Isle* is scheduled for release in late 2024. His poems have appeared in *Poetry* (Chicago), *Poem-a-Day* published by The Academy of American Poets, *The Southwest Review*, *Black Warrior Review* and *Plume Poetry*. In 2011, Simms was awarded a Certificate of Recognition from the Pennsylvania State Legislature for his service to the arts. He lives with his wife Eva, a philosopher and psychologist, in the historic neighborhood of Mount Washington overlooking the city of Pittsburgh.

Ivanna Smith - Sea and Storm (Poetry)

Ivy Smith is an Aliquippa native whose work has appeared in *Pulp*, *The Antithesis Journal*, and on *SLB Radio*. Ivy loves poetry, deriving inspiration from Emily Dickinson, E.E Cummings, and her other favorite authors of the moment.

Mary Soon Lee - CATACHRESES (Poetry)

Mary Soon Lee was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for thirty years. She is a Grand Master of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association and a three-time winner of both the AnLab Readers' Award and the Rhysling Award. Her latest book is "How to Navigate Our Universe," containing how-to astronomy poetry. Her website, cryptically named, is marysoonlee.com.

Cynthia Stewart - Young Woman at a Window* (Poetry)

Cynthia Stewart is from Pittsburgh and is a former public school teacher. She holds a BS in Education from the University of Pittsburgh and an MPA from Pitt's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. She takes creative writing classes through LaRoche University and has been a member of Carlow University's Madwomen in the Attic

program since 2019. She has written several short stories and flash fiction pieces. Now she primarily writes poetry. Her poetry has appeared in *Voices from the Attic* Volume XXVI, Volume XVII, Volume XXVIII, *Rune* and *Critique of the Gods*.

Mary Swope - someday (Poetry)

Mary Swope is currently a first-year graduate student at RMU studying Counseling Psychology. Mary has always had a love for the arts, and will occasionally channel her emotions into fantasy poems of someone longing for things to change. Outside of this, Mary is a member of the RMU Bands as a clarinet player, where she is able to express herself through the universal language of music. Mary hopes to continue with the clarinet and writing poetry but has begun to work on her painting skills and hopes to improve.

Arlene Weiner - A Week of Cake (Poetry)

Arlene Weiner lives in Pittsburgh, where she is active in community poetry groups. She has been a den mother, a Shakespeare scholar, a cardiology technician, part of a group developing computer-based education, and an editor. Her poems have been published in such journals as *The Louisville Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Poet Lore*, online, and in anthologies; and read on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac*. Arlene was awarded a MacDowell fellowship. She also writes plays. Ragged Sky Press has published three collections of her poetry: *Escape Velocity* (2006), *City Bird* (2016), and *More* (2022).

Tristan West - basking ambiance (Photography)

Tristan enjoys photography, specifically nature/animals and astrophotography. In his free time, he can be found outside in nature staying active and reading. Tristan is a Jr. at RMU and is a biology major on the pre-med track and plans on becoming an anesthesiologist later in life.

David Wheeler - Student in the mist (Photography)

David Wheeler teaches psychology at Robert Morris University. He has been a photographer for over 60 years. Most of his work has been event

photography and travel photography. After taking the portrait photography course here at RMU, David started doing portrait photography of people. The theme this year is "The best camera is the camera you have with you."

Hayley Whittaker - Mental Fracture (Art)

Hayley Whittaker is a student at Robert Morris University studying psychology. Since a young age, she has been passionate about art. Through her artistic past, she has won numerous awards through the Scholastic Art and Writing contests. Her artwork has been displayed in public buildings across the areas of Fayette and Westmoreland counties. Whittaker's artistic skills and creativity earned her the position of Vice President of the National Art Honors Society for two consecutive years. Throughout her high school career, she played a large role in helping paint several murals in her hometown that have been admired by many people. Whittaker enjoys expressing her art to others and hopes that they can be inspired by her work.

Mackenzie Wilhelm - Playground Games (Photography) and Hunting Season (Prose)

Mackenzie Wilhelm is a senior Professional Writing major and minoring in Graphic Design at RMU. She isn't afraid to let her inner artist show when it comes to writing and art. Mackenzie loves taking risks when experimenting in many mediums. She is pursuing a career in technical writing to combine her writing and graphic design skills.

Christine Aikens Wolfe - My Mother Jean in her 90's (Poetry)

Christine Aikens Wolfe's story *Prophet* was published in *Rune* in 2023. Her story *Owl & Stag* appeared in the anthology *The Wild Hunt* (Air & Nothingness Press, 2021). She attended Saturday workshops at the U. of Pittsburgh with Craig Bernier, Kathleen George, Derek Green, Lewis Nordan, and others. In 2012, she self-published a fairy tale, *The Prince & the Thorny Wood*, and a novella, *Rise Up Singing*. She attends Madwomen in the Attic fiction & poetry workshops. and published short stories in *Voices from the Attic*: 'Anhinga' in Vol. XXI (2015) and

'Invisible' in Vol. XXII (2016). She published a full-length book of poetry, *Garlanding Green*, with Dos Madres Press (2018), and has poetry published in Gargoyle, Loyalhanna Review, Paterson Literary Review, Sonnetto Poesia and *Voices from the Attic* Vol. XXIII (2019) and more.

Aydden Yope - The only house on W Alison WY (Prose)

Aydden Yope is a Sophomore at Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School in Midland, PA. His Major is Writing and Publishing. His home district, however, is Ambridge, and it is where he went to school up until his first year of high school. Aydden enjoys writing short fiction in the genres, fantasy, realistic fiction, and sci-fi. When he's not writing, he enjoys playing video games and developing video games of his own.

“You use a glass mirror to see your face. You use works of art to see your soul.”

—George Bernard Shaw



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